

One More JFK Probe Witness Knocks on Heaven's Door

Manuel Artime, forty-five, Watergate figure and leader of the Bay of Pigs invasion against Cuba, died of cancer in Miami on November 15. His loss was another loss for the House Assassinations Committee, and for everyone who hopes that someday the full story will be known of America's attempts to overthrow the Cuban government and the far-reaching consequences those attempts may have had.

Artime could have provided valuable information on the vast CIA and Cuban exile network that was plotting against Castro in the early '60s, which the committee is now trying to investigate. Both Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby had extensive dealings with this cloak-and-dagger scene prior to the assassination of John Kennedy. A total of seven important probable witnesses for the inquiry have died in the last several years; Artime's death was the first of apparently natural causes (Short Takes, 12/3).

For nearly two decades, Artime was a popular leader of the Cuban exile community in Miami known as "Little Havana." A dedicated anticommunist, he worked closely with the CIA in its many attempts to harass and depose Castro. Handsome, charismatic and articulate, Artime was known in the exile community as the CIA's "Golden Boy" because of his leadership qualities and unbending faith in the CIA and America.

Artime, like many of his fellow expatriates, first fought with Castro's rebel army against Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista, but felt betrayed when he realized that Castro was aligning himself as a communist. By 1960 Artime was recruiting fellow Cubans for a CIA-arranged invasion of the

island to overthrow Castro.

The invasion scheme had been hatched during the Eisenhower days under the eager tutelage of Vice President Richard Nixon, and was inherited by a reluctant Kennedy administration. With the help of his good friend E. Howard Hunt, the CIA's political officer for the operation, Artime assumed the leadership of the invasion force, known as Brigade 2506. Artime was also a member of the Cuban Revolutionary Council, the provisional government that would take over once the "Liberation Army" carved a foothold in Cuba. The CRC, assembled by Hunt, had an office in New Orleans at the same address that the allegedly pro-Castro Lee Harvey Oswald would later use for his one-man branch of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.

The invaders were crushed by Castro's forces within days after their landing at the Bay of Pigs on Cuba's southern coast. After spending twenty months in Cuba's jails, the survivors were ransomed out for \$62 million in medicine and supplies by an embarrassed Kennedy administration. Artime carried a special price on his head, costing the US government \$500,000.

If anything, the Bay of Pigs affair fueled the fanaticism of the exile leaders and their CIA handlers, and created a deep bitterness over Kennedy's failure to save the invasion by committing US military might when it was needed. Their sense of betrayal was inflamed when Kennedy addressed the newly returned Brigade 2506 at the Orange Bowl on December 29, 1962. After Artime and other invasion leaders handed him the Brigade's flag before thousands of exiles, Kennedy vowed it would fly one day over "a free Havana." At that same time, JFK had ordered a clampdown on their clandestine harassment of Cuba.

By the summer of '63, Artime, his spirits undaunted, began

preparations for another major assault on Cuba. He developed an alliance with President Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua and Carlos Prío Socarras, president of Cuba before Batista, for a project called Second Naval Guerilla. (Socarras, another prospective witness before the Assassinations Committee, allegedly shot himself through the head last April.)

The existence of Second Naval Guerilla, to this day, is being concealed where possible by the FBI, CIA and House and Senate intelligence committees. The script this time called for Castro to be assassinated before the invasion. (E. Howard Hunt admits he tried in vain to convince his CIA superiors to assassinate Castro "before or coincident with the [Bay of Pigs] invasion. . .") The Senate's Church Committee, in its report on assassination attempts against foreign leaders, recounts the story of "AM/LASH," who was to assassinate Castro with a high-powered rifle in 1965. The report said nothing more.

Researchers have determined that AM/LASH was Roland Cubela, a friend of Artime, and that Artime himself (who was identified only as "B-1" in the Church report) provided Cubela with the rifle, complete with scope and silencer. According to the plan, once Cubela had killed Castro, Artime would launch his 750-man army from their training camps in Nicaragua and Costa Rica and strike Cuba when it was leaderless and bewildered.

Insiders claim that this whole Artime-Somoza operation was shut down when President Johnson sent the Marines to the Dominican Republic in May 1965 to put down an uprising. According to this explanation, LBJ felt one military operation in the Caribbean was enough. Others suggest that Castro's agents (and even the FBI) had infiltrated the training camps and knew the CIA's every move.

The Church Committee and other government agencies

apparently have tried to cover up Second Naval Guerilla for at least two reasons. The operation was in complete violation of Kennedy's, and presumably Johnson's, orders that all attempts to overthrow Castro be canceled. Second Naval Guerilla would thus be another example of the CIA's unfettered independence at the time. Full exposure might also directly link a key Watergate figure, E. Howard Hunt, to an assassination plot. After Howard Hunt and the Cubans were arrested for the break-in at the Democratic National Headquarters, Artime established the Cuban Defense Committee for the burglars. In the fall and winter of '72, his committee frequently funneled hush money from Hunt and others to the Cuban burglars. (President Nixon referred to it several times in conversations with John Dean, as recorded on the White House tapes. Artime was invited to Nixon's second inauguration shortly thereafter.)

Artime died at Miami's American Hospital of cancer of the liver and pancreas. He learned of the cancer only several weeks before his death. News reports claim that his hospital room was under very heavy guard, the reason for which is unclear. He leaves his wife and six children.

Artime was a loss for the Assassinations Committee in many ways, but primarily because he could have told whether Kennedy and Johnson knew of, let alone authorized, Second Naval Guerilla and its assassination plot. At a time when some people are arguing that Castro had Kennedy killed in response to the CIA attempts on his own life, and while others strongly suspect the CIA-Cuban exile band did it themselves in retaliation for being let down, it would be crucial to determine whether Kennedy, or any President, controlled the CIA at all.

Harvey Yazjian

*Extensive confabulation
+ given him in 1977*